

U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity
Legislative Hearing
March 16, 2022

Statement for the Record submitted by
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Moore, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to share this statement for the record from MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger to highlight the urgent need for action by Congress to achieve a more comprehensive and lasting solution to the preventable problem of veteran food insecurity.

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart our collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgement or precondition. In the United States, this responsibility to prevent and respond to hunger lies centrally with our federal government. The charitable food sector is in no way equipped to respond to the scope of food insecurity in America—all of the charitable and faith-based organizations in this country combined contribute less than ten percent of all food assistance in this country and have extremely limited capacity to respond to more than emergency needs. **The food insecurity crisis in our country is the purview of the federal government and it is impractical, inefficient, and immoral to abdicate this responsibility and attempt to outsource the response to a charitable sector that is already overburdened.**

For over 36 years, MAZON has been fighting to end hunger among all people of all faiths and backgrounds, and for nearly ten years, we have prioritized addressing the long-overlooked issue of food insecurity among veterans and military families.

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Jewish text and tradition compel us to honor the dignity of every person, especially those who are struggling. **No matter a person's circumstance, no one deserves to be hungry. Those who have bravely served to defend our country especially should never have to be subjected to the cruel and painful experience of hunger.**

MAZON has testified before Congress and shared our insights and recommendations about food insecurity among veteran households numerous times over the years. Unfortunately, too little progress has been made during the intervening time. There have been some positive steps, both programmatically and through policy change, that have helped; most notably, the recent adoption of the Hunger Vital Signs screening tool at all VA outpatient facilities (MAZON has long advocated for mandatory food insecurity screenings and SNAP eligibility screening, and application assistance across the VA system; much more still remains to be done on this front to connect food insecure veterans with SNAP) and increases to SNAP benefits through the temporary boost included through COVID-19-relief legislation and the recent update to the Thrifty Food Plan by USDA.

For the purposes of this legislative hearing, we call your attention to and urge your support of the proposal to make permanent Section 4201 of the Isakson-Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020. The authorization for the use of funds for improved flexibility in assistance to homeless veterans has made a critical difference in meeting the food security and other basic needs of homeless veterans during the course of the pandemic, and the permanent authorization would enable the Department of Veterans Affairs to more comprehensively and expeditiously respond to urgent needs and work toward more lasting, systemic solutions. This flexibility is needed on a permanent basis so that the VA can quickly triage immediate and urgent needs such as food, shelter, clothing, transportation, and

communications; previous limitations placed on VA funds precluded the delivery of many forms of such basic assistance that were desperately needed.

Once these fundamental necessities are secured, it will become more effective and efficient to assess and address the whole-person needs of homeless veterans. By starting with the most basic of physiological needs critical for physical survival, as articulated in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the VA can build trust among homeless veterans in dire need and engage them in participating in more comprehensive, wrap-around supports and services aimed at long-term positive outcomes. The permanent authorization of the Section 4201 flexibilities represents a small but helpful step to provide the VA with necessary tools and abilities to address the basic human needs for homeless veterans.

However, most of the suggestions and recommendations made by MAZON in recent years continue to be relevant, often urgent, and yet they remain unfulfilled.

As such, we use the opportunity of this legislative hearing to reiterate recommendations from MAZON. Appended to this statement are copies of previous testimonies offered by senior leaders from MAZON at recent Congressional hearings exploring the topics of food insecurity among veteran and military families. By recirculating these testimonies with this statement for the record, MAZON hopes to renew attention to our previous policy and programmatic recommendations to take a more comprehensive approach to ending veteran hunger that is centered around increasing access to and strengthening SNAP, the cornerstone of our federal nutrition safety net and the most significant resource available to help food insecure veterans.

It should be noted that, while the temporary boost to SNAP benefits and other COVID-19 assistance provided by the federal government helped to alleviate some material hardship

and prevented food insecurity and poverty rates from dramatically spiking due to the pandemic and associated economic downturn, the American population — including veterans — experienced exacerbated challenges that compounded food insecurity rates and more severe impacts. These challenges include elevated rates of unemployment (particularly within the service sector and disproportionately impacting female employees and people of color), widespread school closures and the loss of subsidized school meals, medical emergencies and the associated financial costs for treatment and lost income from time out of work), and mental health distress.

We are particularly concerned about the impacts of racial inequities on veterans and the ongoing tragedy of heightened suicide rates among veterans. While there is growing public awareness and concern about both issues, there remains a need for viable policy proposals to address them. The disproportionate impact of food insecurity on households of veterans of color highlight racial inequities that are perpetuated through public policies and program implementation. Closing the SNAP participation gap for veterans and improving the program to better reach and serve food insecure veterans of color will not only signal a commitment to meaningful efforts to address racial justice — it will concretely contribute to those efforts to achieve greater racial equity in federal policy.

As noted by Dr. Thomas O'Toole during his [testimony before this Subcommittee on January 9, 2020](#), a growing body of research sheds light on the relationship between food insecurity and risk factors for poor mental health and suicide. A new study on "[Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave the US Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of U.S. Soldiers](#)" by researchers at the USDA Economic Research Service and the U.S. Army Public Health Center offers additional insight about linkages between food

insecurity, mental health, and military service. Contributing to the VA's stated top clinical priority to end veteran suicide and implement a comprehensive public health approach to reach all veterans, the VA must step up to provide leadership around a robust effort to address veteran food insecurity by proactive SNAP outreach to veterans both within and outside of the VA system. In the testimonies appended to this statement, MAZON highlights specific recommendations for improving SNAP and closing the veteran SNAP participation gap.

A recommendation made by [Dr. Colleen Heflin during her testimony at the May 27, 2021 House Rules Committee roundtable examination of the hunger crisis among veterans and military families](#) holds great promise to decrease the risk of food insecurity during the transition from military service to civilian life, when many households are more likely at risk of food insecurity. MAZON urges this Subcommittee to explore this suggestion for the federal government to provide a targeted transitional benefit to all families leaving military service below a certain rank. Such a benefit would act as a stabilizing mechanism and provide much-needed additional assistance to veterans and their families during a time when they may experience a greater level of financial need. Such a transitional benefit, especially one that utilizes innovative new technologies for benefit delivery and personalized communications, opens up opportunities to proactively assess and respond to the whole-person needs of veterans by building trust and facilitating connections to other available resources and comprehensive services. In addition, MAZON supports the distinct, yet often related, recommendations by Dr. Heflin to better protect veterans with disabilities from food insecurity.

MAZON was proud to recently sign a Memorandum of Agreement with the Veterans Health Administration to work collaboratively to address veteran food insecurity. While MAZON is excited about this opportunity to provide input,

contribute resources, and collaborate on innovative program ideas and solutions, the limited commitments to date by the VA and slow pace of response to a preventable crisis with multiple negative consequences is deeply distressing. Additionally, the sporadic oversight by Congress and the lack of urgency that has been demonstrated in holding federal agencies accountable to a proactive, robust, and measurable solution to ending veteran food insecurity must be rectified. There is great bipartisan concern in Congress about veteran food insecurity, but the commitment to mandate and provide funding for proven solutions has unfortunately not matched the lofty rhetoric.

It is time to recalibrate the VA's goals and priorities in the effort to provide a comprehensive response to veteran food insecurity. The VA's news and partnership email updates are well-intentioned, but we are concerned that they too often focus on veteran food distributions or food pantries organized by VA facilities and community partners. The implicit abdication of responsibility by the federal government to the charitable sector is unsustainable and dangerous as it shifts attention away from the need to strengthen and improve access to SNAP and other federal programs that serve as the frontline response to veteran food insecurity.

Success should be measured not by how many food pantries open at VA centers, but rather by how many food pantries become unnecessary due to veteran households receiving the support they need and are entitled to through programs like SNAP. MAZON urges this Subcommittee to step up its leadership as a vital part of this effort by prioritizing the protection and improvement of SNAP, supporting innovative and effective ways to better connect food insecure veterans with federal nutrition assistance programs (including mandating that VA facilities conduct on-site SNAP eligibility screenings and application assistance in addition to the food insecurity screenings currently conducted), bolstering nutrition

assistance support during transition from active duty to veteran status, strengthening the supports and removing barriers for food insecure veterans with disabilities, and centering the experiences and perspectives of veterans with lived experiences with food insecurity.

Veteran food insecurity — indeed, all food insecurity — is a solvable problem, and the solution lies in mustering the political will to prioritize and address it. MAZON welcomes the opportunity to continue to work as a partner with this Subcommittee, with others in Congress, with all relevant federal agencies, and with VSOs and other community partners, to build this political will and do right by those who have bravely served our country. No veteran should ever have to worry about being able to feed themselves or those in their family. We owe them much more than the half-measures and broken promises of our policies and programs to date.

Hungry veterans cannot eat another report or hearing transcript. MAZON urges this Subcommittee to immediately identify *concrete* steps that Congress and the Administration can take *now* to end the crisis of veteran food insecurity. We stand ready with suggestions and with resolve to work in partnership.

House Agriculture Committee
Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight,
and Department Operations

"Hunger Among Veterans and Servicemembers: Understanding the Problem and
Evaluating Solutions"

Virtual Hearing – November 10, 2021

Testimony of Mia Hubbard
Vice President of Programs
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

Chairwoman Hayes, Ranking Member Bacon, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today representing MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger at this hearing on the topic of hunger among veteran and military families. Let's take a step back for just a moment and reflect on how absurd it is that we need to discuss this problem — one that should never have been allowed to happen in the first place, let alone to persist for many years with little to no attention or action to address it by our military leaders and public officials. *There is simply no reason that military families and veterans should experience the painful reality of hunger.* As I will share with you, there are several simple, straightforward actions that Congress, the Administration, and federal agencies can take to make a meaningful difference in addressing this preventable problem.

Fundamental to all of these actions is the basic recognition of the hardships that far too many of our military and veteran families must endure. MAZON has diligently led the national efforts to call attention to and address military and veteran and food insecurity for nearly a decade. During this time, there has been far too little acknowledgment, analysis, and action in response to these problems. More frequently, leaders look the other way, failing to even dignify the suffering of those who bravely serve our country because the reality of this problem is inconvenient, uncomfortable, and embarrassing to our nation. Even worse are attempts to blame the problem on the veteran and military families who struggle with food insecurity. Members of Congress, committee staff, and Pentagon leaders have repeatedly told MAZON to stop pushing this issue because, as they claimed to us, "this is just an issue of personal financial mismanagement." Or: "People are in this situation because they don't know how to budget their money and make foolish purchases that put them in financial trouble." Enough is enough! We need to stop the wrongheaded accusations, harmful myths, and misinformation that pervade much of the public discourse about safety net programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the specific reality of food insecurity for far too many of our veteran and military families.

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Your leadership — and that of the Administration and agency officials — is urgently needed to chart a different course, one that starts with acknowledging this problem and owning that this is *your responsibility*. ***Military and veteran families have been allowed to go hungry on your watch.*** Your inaction has allowed this situation to persist for years and to grow worse over the course of the pandemic.

So, I urge you: make a change and muster the political will to act to end this solvable and unfortunate problem. Drop the empty platitudes of how much you love the troops. Instead, back up the rhetoric and prioritize support for those who bravely serve or have served and yet struggle amidst hardship. Don't wrap yourselves in the American flag to proclaim your patriotism and thank veteran and military families for their service if you won't have their backs in a time of real need.

In Deuteronomy 15:7-8 we are commanded, echoing a directive and basic value that is shared across all faith traditions:

“If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the L-rd your G-d is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.”

All of the witnesses here today are imploring you to look, to acknowledge that there are needy veteran and military families among us, and to act. And we are reminding you, as leaders of our country, on behalf of all of us, as a fulfillment of our collective responsibility to care for one another, to generously open your hearts, extend your hand, and provide for what is badly needed by our struggling military and veteran families.

Background

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst, without judgement or precondition. For over 36 years, MAZON has fought to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds, and for nearly ten years, we have prioritized addressing the long-overlooked issue of food insecurity among military and veteran families. MAZON's groundbreaking project, *This is Hunger*, centered around the stories of real people who have struggled with hunger also includes powerful accounts from veteran and military families who faced food insecurity; you can find some of these stories included in the addendum at the end of this testimony.

This is not MAZON's first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Nearly six years ago, Abby J. Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, spoke as a witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to

discuss the problem and propose solutions to military and veteran hunger.¹ In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first-ever Congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity. Also in 2015, I had the opportunity to testify about military and veteran hunger before the National Commission on Hunger established by Congress.² In January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a Congressional briefing, “Veterans in the Farm Bill.”³ In 2020, Josh Protas, MAZON’s Vice President of Public Policy testified before the House Veterans Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity about veteran hunger.⁴ Earlier this year, Ms. Leibman participated in a congressional roundtable hosted by the House Rules Committee entitled “Examining the Hunger Crisis Among Veterans and Military Families.”⁵ Each of these occasions shined a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in incrementally positive steps, including federal agencies collecting new data about and addressing veteran and military food insecurity.

The world has changed so much since MAZON first brought Congressional and public attention to these issues nearly ten years ago, but our institutions have moved too slowly and there has been too little progress during the intervening time to adequately address military and veteran hunger. In some ways, the problems have grown worse; veteran and military families were severely impacted by COVID-19 and the resulting economic downturn. Food insecurity exacerbated in these populations during this time, contributing to the worsening of diet-related chronic disease, lost productivity, and even spikes in suicide rates.

Some positive steps, through both programmatic and policy change, have helped. Most notably, the recent adoption of the Hunger Vital Signs screening tool at all VA outpatient facilities as well as increases to SNAP benefits through the temporary boost included in COVID-19 relief legislation and the recent

¹ U.S. House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition, *Testimony of Abby J. Leibman*. Jan. 2016, https://republicans-agriculture.house.gov/uploadedfiles/ajl_final.pdf.

² *National Commission on Hunger, Testimony of Mia Hubbard*. June 2015.

³ “Bipartisan Group of Representatives Holds Congressional Briefing on Veterans in the Farm Bill.” U.S. Representative Chellie Pingree, 19 Jan. 2018, <https://pingree.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=174>.

⁴ U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, *Testimony of Josh Protas*. Jan. 2020, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/VR/VR10/20200109/110350/HHRG-116-VR10-Wstate-ProtasJ-20200109.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. House Committee on Rules, *Testimony of Abby J. Leibman*. May 2021, <https://mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Written-Testimony-for-5.27.21-House-Rules-Cte-Roundtable.pdf>.

update to the Thrifty Food Plan by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have been very helpful.

However, while most of the suggestions and recommendations made by MAZON in recent years continue to be relevant, and often urgent, they remain unfulfilled.

As such, my statement today includes citations and links to reports and testimonies offered by MAZON's leadership at previous Congressional hearings exploring the topics of food insecurity among veteran and military families. By calling renewed attention to these resources, which include extensive information, historical context, and details about the challenges and opportunities, MAZON hopes to highlight our previous policy and programmatic recommendations and urge you to carefully consider them as the foundation of a more comprehensive approach to ending military and veteran hunger.

While this hearing and my testimony address the issue of food insecurity for both currently serving military and veteran families, we must be clear that military families and veteran families are different populations, each with distinct challenges, needs, and opportunities for policy change. There are some overlapping areas of concern around the transition period, but generally, the circumstances and need for solutions look different for each population. In addition, this testimony does not address all military populations facing food insecurity, particularly among the National Guard and Reserve components, and these issues warrant additional attention and investigation. Further, because of the way that Congress handles authorizations and appropriations for the U.S. Coast Guard, separate legislative actions are needed to address the challenges of food insecurity among Coast Guard families. This problem received media coverage during the last federal government shutdown, when food pantries quickly popped up at numerous installations to support Coast Guardsmen and Guardswomen who missed their first paychecks and found it difficult to make ends meet and feed their families.

Hunger Among Currently-Serving Military Families

Across America, food banks have experienced unprecedented demand. Families struggling to put food on the table during the COVID-19 pandemic turned to food pantries, charities, and federal benefits as they endured the painful reality of hunger. Among those who sought — and continue to seek — help are military families unsure from where their next meal will come. Servicemembers who enlisted to fight for our country already sacrifice so much and are struggling to feed themselves and their families.

This is not a new problem. Sadly, even before the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic crisis, military families faced food insecurity. These currently-serving members of the Armed Forces — often junior enlisted servicemembers

(typically enlisted ranks E-1 through E-4) with multiple dependents — have turned in desperation to emergency assistance for years, surviving with the help of the food pantries that operate on or near every military installation in the United States. At Camp Pendleton alone, there are four food pantries serving the base community, each one routinely assisting hundreds of military families each month. Due to the lack of transparency from the Department of Defense (DoD) in collecting data on food insecurity among servicemembers and their families and its reluctance to publicize any information they do have, the true scale of this crisis is unknown. However, the data that are publicly available from both government and military interest group surveys indicate that the scope of the crisis is broad and affects military families across the country.⁶ This matches anecdotal accounts reporting increases in the number of military families seeking assistance to put food on the table.

Key findings from MAZON’s extensive work on this issue are highlighted in our report, “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.,” published in April 2021.⁷ They include:

- Addressing military hunger is a matter of readiness, retention, and recruitment.
- Food insecurity among military families disproportionately impacts military families of color and failure to address it adds to the challenges around racial equity in the military and the lack of diversity among officer and leadership ranks.
- There is a correlation between food insecurity and negative mental health outcomes, including suicide; responding to military food insecurity is a critical action as part of the effort to address the crisis of increasing rates of military suicide.
- At least part of this problem stems from an unintended barrier to assistance for struggling military families by counting a servicemember’s Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) as income in determining eligibility for federal nutrition programs like SNAP.
- Junior-enlisted members are more diverse in race, ethnicity, and gender than higher military ranks. They also support families at much higher rates than previous cohorts of junior-enlisted servicemembers. The DoD has not adequately adjusted the base salary to reflect the reality of our modern military force.

⁶ McFadden, Cynthia, et al. “Why Are Many of America’s Military Families Going Hungry?” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 14 July 2019, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/military/why-are-many-america-s-military-families-going-hungry-n1028886>.

⁷ Leibman, Abby J., and Josh Protas. “Hungry in the Military: Food Insecurity Among Military Families in the U.S.” *MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger*, Apr. 2021, <https://mazon.org/wp-content/uploads/MAZON-Military-Hunger-Report-April-2021.pdf>.

- The circumstances that give rise to food insecurity among military families are complex, yet simplistic responses based on unfounded stereotypes are often pursued in lieu of more meaningful solutions.
- In the last year, COVID-19 exacerbated the unique financial challenges of military families, such as high rates of spousal unemployment, lack of access to affordable childcare, and costs associated with frequent relocations.

Hunger Among Veteran Families

MAZON was proud to recently sign a Memorandum of Agreement with the Veterans Health Administration to work collaboratively to address veteran food insecurity. While we are excited about this opportunity to provide input and collaborate on innovative program ideas and solutions, the limited commitments to date by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and slow pace of response to a preventable crisis with multiple negative consequences is deeply distressing. Additionally, the sporadic oversight by Congress combined with a lack of urgency to hold federal agencies accountable to a proactive, robust, and measurable solution to end veteran food insecurity must be rectified. There is great bipartisan concern expressed in Congress about veteran food insecurity, but the commitment to mandate and provide funding for proven solutions has unfortunately not matched the lofty rhetoric.

Recent research emphasizes the urgent need for more proactive responses to prevent and address veteran food insecurity and highlights particular challenges.

- Calling attention to the significant SNAP participation gap among veteran households, a recent study noted that among food insecure veterans, less than one third were in households receiving SNAP; among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 were SNAP-recipient households.⁸
- Between 2005 and 2019, [working-age] veterans were predicted to be 7.4 percent more likely to live in a food insecure household than nonveterans. The elevated risk is concentrated among veterans whose most recent period of military service was during the pre-9/11 Gulf War era (August 1990 to August 2001) and the interwar period between May 1975 and July 1990.⁹

⁸ Pooler, Jennifer, et al. "Issue Brief: Veterans and Food Insecurity." *IMPAQ International*, Nov. 2018, <https://impagint.com/sites/default/files/issue-briefs/Transitional%20Employment%20Programs%20Overview%20Components%20andModels.pdf>.

⁹ Rabbitt, Matthew P., and Michael D. Smith. "Food Insecurity Among Working-Age Veterans." *U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*, May 2021,

- A new study found that veterans with PTSD and/or a history of military sexual trauma are at significantly increased risk for food insecurity. Of women veterans who were food insecure, nearly half (48.9%) had a history of military sexual trauma.¹⁰

It is time to recalibrate the federal government's goals and priorities to provide a comprehensive response to veteran food insecurity. The VA's news and partnership email updates are well-intentioned, but the focus is too often on supplemental help, like veteran food distributions or food pantries organized by VA facilities and community partners, rather than connecting veterans with needed, long-term government support. The implicit abdication of responsibility by the government to the charitable sector is unsustainable and dangerous as it shifts attention away from the need to strengthen and improve access to SNAP and other federal programs that serve as the most effective, frontline response to veteran food insecurity.

Success should be measured not by how many food pantries operate at VA centers, but rather by how many food pantries become unnecessary due to veteran households receiving the support they need and are entitled to through programs like SNAP.

In addition, we are particularly concerned about the impacts of racial injustice on veterans and the ongoing tragedy of heightened suicide rates among veterans. While there is growing public awareness and concern about both, few viable policy proposals exist to address either. The disproportionate impact of food insecurity on households with veterans of color highlight racial inequities that are perpetuated through public policies and program implementation. Closing the SNAP participation gap for veterans and improving the program to better reach and serve food insecure veterans of color not only signals a commitment to meaningful efforts to address racial justice — it concretely contributes to efforts to achieve greater racial equity in federal policy.

As noted by Dr. Thomas O'Toole during his testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity on January 9, 2020, a growing body of research sheds light on the relationship between food insecurity and risk factors for poor mental health and suicide.¹¹ A new study, "Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave

https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/101269/err-829_summary.pdf?v=9153.

¹⁰ Cohen, Alicia J., et al. "Risk Factors for Veteran Food Insecurity: Findings from a National US Department of Veterans Affairs Food Insecurity Screener." *Public Health Nutrition*, 2021, pp. 1–26., [doi:10.1017/S1368980021004584](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021004584).

¹¹ ["Statement of Dr. Thomas O'Toole, Senior Medical Advisor Office of the Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Operations, Veterans Health Administration \(VHA\) Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\)." 2020.](#)

the US Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of U.S. Soldiers” by researchers at the USDA Economic Research Service and the U.S. Army Public Health Center offers additional insight about linkages between food insecurity, mental health, and military service.¹² To achieve the VA’s stated top clinical priority to end veteran suicide and implement a comprehensive public health approach to reach all veterans, the VA must bolster their leadership and implement a robust effort to address veteran food insecurity through proactive SNAP outreach to veterans, both within and outside of the VA system.

Additionally, a recommendation made by Dr. Colleen Heflin during her testimony at the May 27, 2021 House Rules Committee roundtable examination of the hunger crisis among veterans and military families holds great promise to decrease the risk of food insecurity during the transition from military service to civilian life, when many households are more at risk of food insecurity.¹³ MAZON urges this Subcommittee to explore her suggestion for the federal government to provide a targeted transitional benefit to all families leaving military service below a certain rank. Such a benefit would act as a stabilizing mechanism and provide much-needed additional assistance to veterans and their families during a time when they may experience a greater level of financial need. In addition, MAZON supports the distinct, yet often related, recommendations by Dr. Heflin to better protect veterans with disabilities from food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations

We all can agree that those who make great personal sacrifices for our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals for themselves or their families. Therefore, MAZON urges this Subcommittee to consider the following specific policy recommendations to address military and veteran hunger.

To address hunger among currently serving military families:

1. **Congress and the Administration should support and prioritize inclusion of the full Military Family Basic Needs Allowance provision in the Fiscal Year 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).** In order to reach all military families experiencing food insecurity and

¹² Beymer, Matthew R, et al. “Association between Food Insecurity, Mental Health, and Intentions to Leave the US Army in a Cross-Sectional Sample of US Soldiers.” *The Journal of Nutrition*, vol. 151, no. 7, 12 May 2021, pp. 2051–2058., <https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/nxab089>.

¹³ [“Written Statement of Colleen Heflin, Professor of Public and International Affairs, Maxwell School at Syracuse University before the Rules Committee, United States House of Representatives, Examining the Hunger Crisis Among Veterans and Military Families.” 2021.](#)

provide them with a sufficient level of assistance, it is critical that this Basic Needs Allowance exclude a servicemember's BAH as counted income. Additionally, a similar provision to support low-income Coast Guard families should be separately authorized and funded, as their needs would not be addressed through the NDAA legislation. This targeted and temporary assistance program must be structured in a streamlined and efficient manner to eliminate common barriers to nutrition assistance including shame, stigma, and fear of retribution.

To effectively implement and administer the Military Family Basic Needs Allowance, there must be a permanent single point of contact at DoD to coordinate with other agencies, Congress, and civil society partners like MAZON. The executive branch and Congress must continue to emphasize that permanent solutions to military hunger are an urgent national priority and fundamentally influence readiness, recruitment, retention, and morale among the Armed Forces.

2. **The Administration must take executive action to ensure that a servicemember's BAH does not count as income in determining eligibility for federal nutrition safety net programs.** President Biden and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack must utilize existing administrative authorities to exclude the BAH as income for all federal nutrition programs including SNAP, WIC, and free and reduced-price school meals. This action would ensure that military families are not prevented from qualifying for assistance and that there is a clear and consistent consideration of the BAH across all federal programs that treats low-income military families in a way comparable to civilian counterparts. Now more than ever, struggling military families must be able to access these programs so that they do not have to turn in desperation to food pantries simply because they cannot get the government assistance they need.
3. **Congress must study and document, in collaboration with the administration, the full scope of military hunger and publicly publish comprehensive data.** Despite strong anecdotal evidence and survey information collected by military service organizations, food insecurity among military families is not adequately documented or monitored by government agencies, and this has allowed the problem to be ignored, obscured, and misrepresented. Data are often withheld from the public or are excessively difficult to obtain. Available data and agency reports are often contradictory, out of date, or simply incomprehensible.

While the recent 13th Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation documented SNAP usage by military households, DoD asked the wrong question. Rather than how many servicemembers are accessing SNAP, we must explore how many military families struggle without the

assistance of federal safety net programs, quietly visiting food pantries on our military bases.

4. **Congress should re-examine military pay levels, acknowledging that the composition and needs of America's military have changed significantly over time and that changes to pay and benefits have not responded accordingly.** Policymakers should seek to better understand the unique lifestyle and financial challenges that military personnel with families experience and consider raising the base pay rates for junior enlisted servicemembers.

5. **Anti-hunger advocates, government agencies, community organizations, and media outlets must reset the narrative around hunger and address the persistent shame and stigma that prevent so many Americans — especially members of the military and their families — from seeking the nutrition assistance they need.**

Collectively, we must acknowledge that there is often an unspoken stigma associated with applying for and accepting government benefits, particularly among military ranks. Some servicemembers are understandably resistant to ask for help because of the shame of their situation and the fear of retribution. This attitude can persist as a servicemember transitions into civilian life, clearly contributing to the related barriers to assistance among America's veterans.

The broader anti-hunger community must work together to prioritize a justice-centered approach to ending military hunger that appropriately centers systemic changes and policy priorities. Leaders in government, as well as the media, can play an important role in moving the public's focus away from charities straining to meet the needs of people facing hunger. This will allow us to ensure that public assistance programs appropriately fulfill our collective responsibility to care for the vulnerable, support people in times of need, and expand opportunities so that all Americans — including all military families — can reach their full potential.

To address hunger among veteran families

1. Protect and Improve SNAP

Food insecurity can often trigger a downward spiral of economic hardship and despair, which unfortunately can lead to suicide. Improving access to SNAP for struggling veterans is an important strategy in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them know that SNAP exists, that they might be eligible, and where and how to apply.

2. Connect Veterans to SNAP

After years of advocating for mandatory food insecurity screenings at the VA, MAZON was pleased that the VA took our advice and recently began implementing the Hunger Vital Signs screener to identify food insecure veterans. But the current process is not doing enough. For veterans who screen positive, the VA must provide on-site SNAP eligibility and application assistance. Veteran-specific SNAP enrollment efforts, such as peer-to-peer veteran outreach, can also help to reduce stigma, normalize the idea of getting help from SNAP, and reach the struggling veterans who fall through the cracks — both within and outside of the VA system. It is imperative that we close the sizable SNAP participation gap for veterans.

3. Federal agencies, including DoD, USDA, VA, and the Department of Homeland Security (agency of jurisdiction for U.S. Coast Guard) must work collaboratively to share data and resources about food insecurity among veteran and military families and work together to proactively find solutions, such as integrating information about federal nutrition programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program and the new “Solid Start” veteran suicide prevention program.

The VA should work with USDA, veteran service organizations, and community partners like MAZON to develop veteran-specific programs and resources about SNAP and other nutrition programs. Innovative and successful pilot programs, like the Veteran Farmers Market Nutrition Program that provides vouchers to veterans with diet-related chronic health conditions to incentivize purchases of fresh produce at farmers markets, should be scaled-up and replicated nationwide.

New and promising initiatives should be explored and supported, such as establishing a targeted transitional nutrition assistance benefit as a way to express gratitude to junior-enlisted military families for their service and provide a temporary measure of assistance for food purchases during an initial designated period when many veterans experience challenges transitioning to civilian life.

4. Listen to Veteran and Military Families

Negative public perceptions of SNAP are only worsened by proposals to restrict the program for only *certain* Americans. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veteran and military families and others reluctant to seek help. This Subcommittee should solicit and

gather personal stories from veteran and military families who have lived experiences with food insecurity to help inform policy proposals and ensure that they are appropriately suited to the circumstances on the ground. The perspectives from veteran and military families should also be centered in the design of education and training programs for VA, DoD, and other personnel who work with individuals experiencing food insecurity. Such training should recognize and appropriately account for heightened stigma and reluctance to seek or accept help in these populations and promote specifically-designed approaches to build trust and comfort for those in need of assistance.

Hunger among veteran and military families — indeed, all food insecurity — is a solvable problem, and the solution lies in mustering the political will to prioritize and address it. MAZON welcomes the opportunity to continue to work as a partner with this Subcommittee, others in Congress, all relevant federal agencies, military service organizations and veteran service organizations, and other community partners to build this political will and support those who have bravely served our country. No servicemember or veteran should ever have to worry about being able to feed themselves or their family. We owe them much more than the half-measures and broken promises of our policies and programs to date.

Hungry military and veteran families cannot eat another report or hearing transcript.

MAZON urges this Subcommittee to immediately identify *concrete* steps that Congress and the Administration can take *now* to end the crisis of military family and veteran food insecurity. We stand ready with suggestions and with resolve to work in partnership.

Addendum

MAZON's groundbreaking project, *This is Hunger*, centers around stories of real people who have struggled with hunger. Included in this powerful, immersive exhibition are stories of real veteran and military families who faced food insecurity. Below are some of these stories.



Ashley from San Diego, California

"If they separated base pay from allowances, that would help our circumstances, because we could then go back and apply for food stamps, and more than likely be approved because they would only be considering the base pay. That would free up our food budget because we could actually buy some of the things we don't get to have regularly because they are expensive. I could afford to feed my family more healthy, homecooked foods. Because it is cheaper just to open up a box of mac & cheese instead of buying all the ingredients separately and making a healthier version of it. So they would be better fed and have better choices. And then in turn some of the debt that we still have would be able to be paid off, so that we could get off of food stamps and still afford to have better quality food, but not having to forego other bills in order to do that.

...

Standing in the line at the food pantry with all the other families, it's just more sad than anything. You look around and see so many people in the same boat as you. You don't know why they're there or anything like that, but there's obviously a need for them to be there.

Some food pantries are just helping anyone; some are only for military. But it is really sad to see how many people, especially how many military families, need help. And I come across military families quite often who don't even know that there are services that they can utilize. They've been struggling for months, and they don't know that there is a source out there that could potentially help them, because it's not directly affiliated with the military. The military doesn't have any say in putting that information out there. So really the only way the military families can find out about any food pantry programs is through word of mouth."

Rebecca from San Diego, California

"I heard a Sergeant Major in the Marine Corps say, 'oh my Marines won't mind taking these cuts, they are better doing more with less, the families will learn to adapt.' I wanted to smack him. The upper echelon of the military doesn't understand what the enlisted go through."

A lot of families that weren't struggling before have started struggling when the military started cutting benefits a few years ago. Medical benefits were cut, salary increases for being stationed in more expensive places were pretty much been eliminated, and the BAH was reduced. Plus, prices in general have gone up and salaries for enlisted stayed pretty much the same. And in our case, while we've always lived by a strict budget and plan, we certainly didn't plan on having twins when we planned on one more child. And we certainly didn't plan on one of them developing autism and exenuating medical problems, and things like that.



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When my husband's Command found out that he didn't have the money to pay for all the extras he was expected to – tickets for this, someone's retirement, etc. – they called our finances into question. They couldn't understand how an E6 Staff Sergeant wouldn't have the money, unless he was being irresponsible. I think the military really needs to look at some of their stellar Marines and ask why those families can't make ends meet.

Before we moved to California from North Carolina, we were doing well. We could save. But the same amount of food that costs \$250 in North Carolina costs \$800 here. The medical benefit is different and we're required to take out additional health insurance for our kids. In the year we've been here, we've had to use our savings to pay our bills and make up the difference between the higher cost of living here and my husband's paycheck, which is the same as it was before.

We used up the last of our saving a few months ago so we could buy school supplies for the kids. I did the worksheet to apply for food stamps and we were above the income limit. They don't consider many things, like our extraordinary medical costs. We've cut out everything we can from our budget. My husband wears shoes with holes and faded uniforms, even though it's against the rules. But what can we do if we don't have the money? I don't refill my medication regularly. We are eating less healthy. My husband and I are down to a meal or two a day. The only way we can make it is to go to the food distributions, but that's not how I want my kids to remember how mom and dad provided for them. I'm gonna do what it takes to take care of my kids. Period. End of story. But there is a backlash that comes when using any programs, like FSSA. Don't get me wrong, if there was a death in the family, nobody thinks twice about you getting assistance from Navy-Marine Relief for that. That attitude needs to change. Definitely."

I'd love to be in a position where we didn't have to use those types of services. If I could work, it would be different. But doing a regular job is not an option with a moderate to severely autistic child. What I'd earn wouldn't offset the cost of specialized home care. I'm looking for a way to make extra income at home. Maybe I'll become a notary because you know how hard it is find a notary?"

Judith from Phoenix, Arizona

"When the military denied my request for financial help, it was like putting a dagger in my back. I spent almost 30 years in the air force. When Saddam invaded Kuwait, I had to explain to my son, I could be sent to war and I'd have to find somebody to take care of him. His whole face just dropped.

What children of the military go through stays with them their whole lives. That's why I get angry when people say I'm pampering my son. Since he got laid off after the economy went down the toilet, I have helped him out. But he has essentially become my caregiver. It's cheaper to pay my son's bills than to hire a full-time caregiver.

We used to be comfortable. But supporting two households is a real struggle. I don't buy big fabulous things – I'm not Wilma Flintstone – but my monthly V.A. benefits and Social Security are no longer enough. I've used up my savings to keep us from becoming homeless. One month, I came within three and a half hours of losing my son's house. I begged the bank, saying, 'Look we're doing the best we can; I don't want it to go into foreclosure,' and the bank came through. It was really embarrassing to ask for help, because I was the one always helping others.

My medical is pretty well taken care of by the V.A. But there are months when I have to skip paying certain bills, and I can no longer afford food like I used to.

Where I used to have two or three chicken thighs in a meal, now I make soup out of them and spread it over the week. I can't get much from the local food pantry because it doesn't carry lactose- and gluten-free food, which my doctor told me I must eat.

Feeding my young grandson properly is the priority, so I'll eat peanut butter and celery for lunch rather than fix myself a real meal. You can get a bunch of celery for \$0.88 and a jar of peanut butter for \$1.50 at the military commissary. Three jars of peanut butter last me about a month. I guess my body will adapt to eating less, and I can get nutrition from the vitamins the doctors have me taking for my medical problems.

My son is trying very hard to get into the solar business, and if he does, we'll be OK again. I'd like to eat something besides peanut butter and celery. But my goal is to get out of debt so that when my time comes, my children won't have to worry. I'd like to leave my kids something for them to remember me by."





Emery from Brandon, Mississippi

"We were one of those couples that purchased the house we could afford, so we could have that slice of the American Dream: our own home. We didn't just jump into it blind - we had two stable incomes.

I was working for a gentleman in home renovations and when his business was hit by the recession, he started paying me late. Then he just stopped paying me altogether. I had to quit the job to look for a new one that paid me for my work. I've been applying for jobs, I'm qualified for, that have openings, but I've gotten no response. Being unemployed has cut our household income in half, and my wife and I are having to make decisions every day on how to allocate what little monies we have: are we going to eat or are we going to pay the light bill? We never lived extravagantly, but there are no luxuries now, no more vacations. We are fighting to hold on to what little we still have.

In the six years since we bought our house, this month is the first time that the mortgage wasn't paid on time. I had to borrow from one place to give to another. I pawned the title to my truck to supplement income. We don't qualify for mortgage assistance or food stamps. That's frustrating because you hear about all these programs to help people like us, but then they tell you you're not eligible. I'm not out to shirk my responsibility or take something that's not mine, but I just don't want to keep sliding further down. Choices have to be made. We've changed how we feed ourselves. I like fish a lot, but now we can't afford it. What we buy is limited to more processed foods. Last night for dinner, I ate some crackers and cheese and some kind of, shall we say, processed meat. There are many times that instead of making myself a salad, I'll have ramen noodles. Granted, ramen is full of sodium and other things that aren't good for you, but it's just basic sustenance and you can buy a case of them for a dollar and change.

It's a tough, tough time, and sometimes it feels insurmountable. I just re-enlisted in the National Guard to do right by my family. I mean the military is one job that as far as I know is always going to be there. It gives us health insurance and a part-time steady income. My wife worries because I am scheduled to go to Afghanistan in 2015, but that could change.

I have been working ever since I was fifteen. To wake up and realize you are among the unemployed is a shock. But we will get through it. My wife and I are a team."

U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity

"Reviewing the Availability of Resources to Address Veteran Hunger"

Testimony of Josh Protas
Vice President of Public Policy
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger

January 9, 2020

Chairman Levin, Ranking Member Bilirakis, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Josh Protas, and I am proud to serve as Vice President of Public Policy for MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national social benefit corporation working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the U.S. and Israel. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON takes to heart the responsibility to care for the vulnerable in our midst without judgement or precondition. In *Deuteronomy 15: 7-8*, we are commanded: "If there is among you a poor person, one of your kin, in any of your towns within your land which God gives you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against them, but you shall open your hand to them, and lend them sufficient for their needs, whatever they may be." Founded in 1985, MAZON identifies emerging and persistent hunger needs and works to promote policies to address these needs. This work is informed by longstanding partnerships with hundreds of food banks, pantries, and other anti-hunger direct service agencies as well as more recent relationships with direct service providers and advocates for veterans, military families, Tribal nations, rural communities, college students, and seniors.

Our Board of Directors has made hunger among veterans and military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. We hold a strong interest in the development of effective and compassionate federal food and nutrition policies for veterans and military families. This is not MAZON's first time appearing before Congress on this topic. Four years ago, Abby Leibman, MAZON's President and CEO, spoke as a

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* Titles for identification purposes only
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witness before the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Nutrition to discuss military and veteran hunger. In 2015, MAZON sponsored the first ever Congressional briefing on the issue of veteran food insecurity, and in January 2018, MAZON coordinated and moderated a Congressional briefing about "Veterans in the Farm Bill." Each of these occasions proved to be significant in shining a more prominent spotlight on these long-ignored issues and resulted in positive steps by federal agencies to take a more active role in collecting data about and addressing veteran food insecurity.

While there has been some progress in addressing veteran food insecurity in America made by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) since 2015, that progress has been extremely modest compared to the severity of the problem. If Congress and federal agencies do not take timely and concerted efforts to prioritize this critical issue, it will only get worse and become more difficult to resolve. This is in part due to the harmful impact of administrative changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) promulgated by the current Administration, which are condoned and even celebrated by some Members of Congress.

There are tens of thousands of veterans struggling to adjust and survive following the transition from military service. Some have recently returned from combat, while others are elderly and facing challenges they thought they had long overcome. Far too often, this struggle leads to despair because there is either an actual, or *perceived*, lack of support; and available support is tinged with stigma or shame, involves an overly complicated application process, or veterans simply do not know that help exists or how to access it. The result for those of limited financial means is often a downward spiral that triggers despair, hopelessness, and tragically can lead to self-harm or even suicide. In fact, recent findings from the National Bureau of Economic Research suggests ways to address the troubling correlation between economic hardship and "deaths of despair." The study found a significant reduction in non-drug suicides among adults with high school education or less due to simple policy interventions that improved their economic well-being: an increase in the minimum wage and the earned income tax credit.¹ As part of the efforts to address the recent suicide epidemic by veterans and military service members, policy makers must recognize the vital importance of federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP in helping to meet their basic needs. It is clear that Members of Congress should support policy proposals that expand access and participation in SNAP in an effort to strengthen the program, not weaken it. Failing to make improvements to SNAP, as well as failing to ensure that veterans are aware of and connected to the program, ignores a valuable and effective tool in the campaign to end veteran suicide.

The scope of food insecurity among veterans is complex, and we simply need more data to be able to respond effectively to the needs of America's food insecure veterans. What we do know is that SNAP helps about 1.3 million low-income veterans, based on American Community Survey data, and that about 7 percent of veterans live in households that receive SNAP. Florida has the largest number of veterans participating in SNAP (116,000), followed by Texas (97,000), California (94,000), Pennsylvania

¹ Dow, WH; Godoy, A; Lowenstein, CA; Reich, M. "Can Economic Policies Reduce Deaths of Despair?" *The National Bureau of Economic Research*. April 2019. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25787>.

(63,000), and New York (59,000).² Several years ago, Blue Star Families helpfully added questions about food insecurity to its Annual Military Lifestyle Survey. However, we should not have to rely solely on this survey—the federal government should routinely gather comprehensive national data to better inform proactive and robust policy responses to this unacceptable—yet solvable—problem.

Data about veteran SNAP participation only tell part of the story. Appallingly, we do not know how many veterans are struggling with hunger, without the assistance of SNAP.

A recent issue brief by Impaq International notes that among food insecure veterans, less than one-third were in households receiving SNAP, and among veterans in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, only about 4 in 10 were in SNAP-recipient households.³ These findings should be deeply troubling to this Subcommittee—this means that the majority of veterans who experience food insecurity do not get the help they need and to which they are entitled. These veterans struggle needlessly, and we fail them as a country when we leave SNAP benefits that they desperately need on the table. If we take the figure of 1.3 million veterans who participate in SNAP and then project—based on the findings by Impaq International—how many more should be receiving SNAP benefits, an estimated 4.3 million veterans experience food insecurity but do not receive SNAP. Nearly 4.3 million veterans who could have assistance available to them are instead are struggling in vain for unacceptable reasons. Connecting these food insecure veterans with SNAP would support better physical and mental health outcomes, employment and economic security, and overall well-being. It would also realize significant long-term health care savings by preventively addressing costly diet-related chronic health conditions. This simple but impactful action should be a top priority for the VA, USDA, and Congress.

Furthermore, we are deeply concerned about special populations of veterans that face heightened rates of food insecurity:

- In a study of **post-9/11 veterans** at the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System, over one in four veterans (roughly 27%) reported problems with food security—about twice the rate of the general population.⁴

² “Number of Veterans Living in Households Where Someone Participates in SNAP (2016-2018).” December 20, 2019. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities* updated data from 2018 report and analysis of data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/snap-helps-almost-14-million-low-income-veterans-including-thousands-in>.

³ Pooler, P; Srinivasan, M; Mian, P; Miller, Z. “Veterans and Food Insecurity.” *Impaq International*. November 2018. <https://www.impaqint.com/work/issue-briefs/veterans-and-food-insecurity>.

⁴ Widome, R; Jensen, A; Bangerter, A; Fu, S. “Food Insecurity Among Veterans of the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” *Public Health Nutrition*, 18(5), p. 844-849. May 2014. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/food-insecurity-among-veterans-of-the-us-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan/F03B64DD63287F2BE5F2067F3E5AC5FB>.

- Recent academic research has noted that more than one in four **women veterans** struggle with hunger and that this prevalence of food insecurity is associated with delayed access to health care and worse health outcomes.^{5,6}
- A recent study about “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University,” which is part of a growing body of research about food insecurity among college students, found that an alarming 67% of **student veterans** reported being food insecure. While this represents a small sample size from a single college campus, it illustrates the need for additional data about the concerning level of need among student veterans.⁷
- Rural and remote areas also experience higher rates of poverty and food insecurity than urban and suburban regions, and **Native American and rural veteran populations** face greater barriers to accessing many critical supports and services including employment, healthcare, transportation, and nutritious food. Furthermore, American Indian and Alaska Native veterans serve in the Armed Forces at higher rates per capita than any other group and this population experiences food insecurity at rates higher than any other demographic group in the U.S. Though there has not been specific data collected about food insecurity rates for Native American or Alaska Native veterans, it is clear that there is a high level of need that exists and is not being adequately addressed.
- Recent research indicates that **low-income, working-age veterans raising children** have more than twice the odds for very low food security compared to non-veterans.⁸

Food insecurity and SNAP participation rates among veterans are clearly tied to issues of unemployment and underemployment for many veterans. While veteran unemployment rates have declined in recent years, underemployment affects more veteran job seekers than non-veteran job seekers. A recent report found that nearly one-third of veteran job seekers are underemployed—a rate 15.6% higher than non-veteran job seekers.⁹ Current SNAP work requirements do not increase employment outcomes, nor do they reduce poverty or food insecurity. USDA’s rule change that would limit those who could be exempted from existing work requirements, particularly individuals who are underemployed or have difficulty maintaining regular schedules with sufficient hours, would move us further in the wrong direction. Taking food away from people makes it more difficult for them to find and sustain meaningful work. Restrictive and arbitrary SNAP work requirements only act as a barrier

⁵ Nerain, K; Bean-Mayberry, B; Washington, DL; Canelo, IA; Darling, JE; Yano, EM. “Access to Care and Health Outcomes Among Women Veterans Using Veterans Administration Health Care: Association With Food Insufficiency.” *Women’s Health Issues*, 28(3). February 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29475630>.

⁶ Petersen, H. “Our Veterans Shouldn’t Go Hungry.” *U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Vantage Point Blog*. December 4, 2019. <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/69018/veterans-shouldnt-go-hungry/>.

⁷ Saltsman, A; Fowler, M; Dogali, M; Johnston, G; Wetherell, O. “Hunger & Homelessness at Worcester State University.” *Urban Action Institute of Worcester State University and WSU’s Department of Urban Studies CityLab*. March 2019. <https://www.worcester.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=13534>.

⁸ Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. “Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014.” Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

⁹ Barrera, Cathy & Phillip Carter. “Challenges on the Homefront: Underemployment Hits Veterans Hard.” *Call of Duty Endowment & ZipRecruiter*. November 2017. https://www.callofdutyendowment.org/content/dam/atvi/callofduty/code/pdf/ZipCODE_Vet_Report_FINAL.pdf.

to accessing the program, exacerbating the problem of food insecurity for veterans and others who struggle instead of helping to solve it.

SNAP is the cornerstone of our nation's nutrition safety net—it helps approximately 36 million low-income Americans by providing a modest allowance to help people pay for food. While the main goal of SNAP is to provide nutrition assistance, there is a ripple effect in communities that supports the federal, state, and local economies—every \$1 spent in SNAP benefits generates \$1.70 in economic activity.¹⁰

SNAP also supports and encourages work, with a carefully designed benefit formula that contains an important work incentive—for most SNAP households, the program provides income support as they earn more and work toward self-sufficiency.

Another important facet of SNAP is that it supports healthy eating. For all Americans, research has made it clear that adequate nutritious food is a vital prerequisite for good health and for reaching one's full potential in life. For those with medical challenges, that connection is even more crucial. The billions of dollars invested in health care for veterans cannot, and must not, overlook the relationship between food security and health. Modest investments in nutrition support could mean the difference between emotional and physical well-being and poverty and despair for countless veterans.

While SNAP is one of the most successful and efficient federal assistance programs, veterans often face unique barriers to accessing the program. For a veteran trying to find out about and access SNAP, the process can often be difficult and confusing. While SNAP guidelines are set at the federal level, each state designs its own application process—the rules are complicated, they vary from state to state, and the application can be lengthy, often requiring recertification. This obviously makes for a complex landscape for an applicant.

We must work together to ensure that struggling veterans and those who serve them: (1) know that SNAP exists, (2) know they might be eligible for SNAP, (3) know where to apply for SNAP, and (4) know how to apply for SNAP. No program can work effectively if it is too difficult to access, if potential recipients are unaware that it exists, and if it comes with restrictions that unintentionally leave out vulnerable populations like veterans, among others.

In the past year, we have seen unprecedented administrative attacks that would restrict and cut SNAP for millions of Americans, including veterans. There is no more insidious rule than that which proscribes harsh and arbitrary work requirements for childless unemployed and underemployed adults age 18-49 (otherwise known as "Able-Bodied Adults without Dependents," or ABAWDs). On February 1, 2019, the Trump Administration posted a notice for proposed rulemaking that, by USDA's own estimate, would result in nearly 688,000 people losing access to SNAP. MAZON submitted

¹⁰ "Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. June 25, 2019. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/policy-basics-the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

comments to USDA expressing deep concern that this rule change would severely impact populations like veterans, who often face unique challenges and may require more than 3 months to secure employment that enables them to be self-sufficient. On November 12, 2019, my organization participated in a meeting with the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA) to further explain our deep concerns, then on December 4, 2019, USDA seemed to dismiss our formal comments and tens of thousands of others as they issued a Final Rule.

In order to understand the misguidedness of this administrative change, it is important to note that most SNAP recipients who are able to work do, in fact, actually work. Under current law, childless adults ages 18 to 49 are restricted to only 90 days of SNAP benefits in three years unless they can prove they are working or participating in an employment and training program for 80 hours per month. States currently have flexibility to request waivers from this harsh and arbitrary time limit for communities that face high unemployment or insufficient job opportunities.

It is clear that a significant number of those who are subject to this rule are veterans. This rule is not nuanced, it is not flexible, it is not a reflection of the realities of struggling Americans in general, and it clearly does not recognize the realities of veterans in that age bracket. These are men and women who often endure many transitions before they secure long-term employment. They are among our nation's underemployed, picking up work when and where they can. MAZON continues to urge USDA to withdraw the rule, and we are committed to pursuing all available advocacy strategies to ensure that this draconian measure is overturned. If the goal of USDA and the current administration is to move able-bodied recipients of SNAP toward self-sufficiency and into employment, there are clearly more effective actions—including targeted investments in employment and training programs that are sorely lacking in most communities—to prioritize instead of the current ideologically-driven approach.

Furthermore, we have proof that this type of policy increases hunger and hardship.

The state of Maine offers a cautionary tale. In 2015, then-Governor LePage chose not to seek a state waiver for SNAP ABAWD requirements, even though his state was eligible for the waiver due to limited job opportunities throughout the state. The devastating impacts of this decision rippled across Maine, with increased demand on the charitable emergency food network, which was already overburdened and straining to keep up with the need. Mainers struggled to find work, in many cases settling for low-wage jobs with limited or no benefits. Thousands of individuals were forced to make painful trade-offs—having to decide whether to pay for food or medicine.

MAZON's partners in the state reported on the widespread food insecurity that persisted and the harmful impact on Mainers in need, including an estimated 2,800 veterans in Maine who were affected by the newly imposed SNAP time limits. Preble Street—our local partner that provides barrier-free services to empower people experiencing homelessness, hunger, and poverty—has submitted a packet of materials to be included in the official record for today's hearing, documenting increased food insecurity among Mainers, including veterans, due to this situation. These materials include personal testimonies from several veterans who were directly impacted by the SNAP policy changes.

I would like to briefly tell you about one of these veterans, Tim Keefe. I spoke with Tim last week and he agreed to allow me to share about his very painful experience since he is not here to do so himself. I urge this Subcommittee to hold another hearing on this topic to be able to hear directly from veterans like Tim who have lived experience struggling with food insecurity—it is critical to hear the voices of those personally impacted by this issue.

Tim is a Navy veteran living in Maine. After being injured at work and completing all measures included in the worker's compensation process, Tim found himself unable to return to work and fell on hard times. With no income, Tim applied for SNAP so that he could buy food. Though the Department of Labor determined that Tim was medically unable to work, he was told that this was not an acceptable verification of disability status for SNAP. Because of the SNAP policy change made by the state of Maine to no longer waive the time limit for "able-bodied adults without dependents," Tim lost his SNAP benefits after three months. The question he repeatedly asked—to officials at the state SNAP office, to officials at the Social Security office where he inquired about the appeal process for disability claims, and to others in the bureaucratic maze he was forced into as he sought assistance—was, "What do I eat between now and then?"

Nobody had an answer for Tim, and he went through a very difficult and painful period. Without SNAP, Tim had no assistance, and he became homeless. Tim endured the harsh weather in rural Maine, living in a tent until he was found and then moving again and again. He resorted to scrounging for food and even catching squirrels to eat to get by. Tim shared in his testimony before the Maine state legislature calling for an exemption for veterans from SNAP work requirements, "There were many times, more than I'd like to try and count, when I would go two or even three days without food. I had to add seven holes to the only belt I've owned for this year to keep my pants on." Tim turned to the Preble Street Veterans Housing Services that helped him with emergency housing and he was able to get food from the local food bank. But that only went so far. Tim noted that, "the food bank has limited resources. Last month I was able to eat two meals a day for 10 days and one meal a day of rice and beans or a canned vegetable for the remainder of the month. I am truly grateful for that food, but I know that I am still lacking in nutrition and calories."

After Tim turned 50, the SNAP time limit no longer applied to him and he was able once again to get the assistance from SNAP that he so desperately needed. Fortunately, Tim is in a much better place now. But he wants others to know about the unnecessary and heart-breaking ordeal that he went through to help inform policy change so that other struggling individuals—veterans and non-veterans alike—do not fall through the cracks like he did. Nobody should ever be forced to ask, "but what do I eat?" because they can't get the help they need from SNAP.

MAZON has time and again raised concerns about the impact of SNAP time limits for people like Tim who need assistance from SNAP. During the 2018 Farm Bill process, we persistently urged the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to protect and strengthen SNAP for all who need it, including veterans. We testified before the House Agriculture Committee and participated in Farm Bill Listening Sessions, raising concerns about proposals that would make it harder for people to know about, apply

for, and access SNAP. As a result of thoughtful and engaged debate and deliberation, in the end Congress agreed that significant changes to the SNAP ABAWD waivers were unwarranted and unwise. The final Farm Bill—which passed both chambers with historic bipartisan margins of support—instead strengthens ten pilot programs that are currently examining best practices for SNAP employment and training.

We all can agree that those who make great personal sacrifices for our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals for themselves or their families. Therefore, we urge this Committee to consider the following policy recommendations:

1. Protect and Improve SNAP

USDA must withdraw its three harmful administrative proposals that would strip SNAP benefits for millions of Americans. Congress must continue to reject these changes to SNAP that would severely hurt veterans, among others. The policies are misguided and ill-informed, and we simply do not know enough about how populations like veterans will be impacted. It is entirely inappropriate for USDA to move forward with administrative changes to SNAP without making any effort to understand how this will negatively impact the lives of America's veterans.

Furthermore, Congress and USDA should increase the amount of SNAP benefits to better support nutritious food purchases, invest further in the SNAP Employment and Training Program to build on successful models, with targeted Veterans E&T initiatives, and support the Veteran Farmers Market Nutrition Program initiative to incentivize purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers markets.

2. Connect Veterans to SNAP

In response to MAZON's 2015 Congressional briefing about veteran food insecurity, the VA initiated the Ensuring Veteran Food Security Working Group, piloting and later implementing across the VA network a formal process to identify veterans who are food insecure. While this represented an important initial step, we are concerned that these actions do not go far enough and that more oversight is needed.

The VA should adopt the validated two-question Hunger Vital Signs screening tool, which is used by groups like the American Academy of Pediatrics, in order to more accurately identify all veterans who are at risk of food insecurity. The current screening tool of a single question only identifies veterans at risk of very-low food security, which is not sufficient. The results of the VA food insecurity screenings indicate very low rates of food insecurity and do not track with academic research and other data, including from Blue Star Families Military Lifestyle Survey. Too many struggling veterans fall through the cracks with the current screening protocol and the VA must adopt a more comprehensive and validated screening method. The VA must also require a more comprehensive intervention and response for veterans who screen positive for food insecurity, including on-site SNAP eligibility screening and application assistance in addition to a broader nutrition consultation and/or referral to a local food pantry or other local

services. MAZON recommends the initiation and funding of a VA pilot program to demonstrate and evaluate such a SNAP application assistance program.

There has been evidence of confusion and misinformation about veteran eligibility for SNAP, particularly regarding the consideration of VA disability ratings and the exemption from SNAP time limits for able-bodied adults without dependents. To provide clarification and help ensure that fewer veterans experience food insecurity, USDA should prepare and distribute guidance specific about veterans and SNAP eligibility to USDA regional offices, state SNAP agencies, VA centers, veteran service organizations, and community partners.

3. Integrate Nutrition Assistance Information into Transition Materials and Training

The transition to civilian life poses significant challenges for many veterans, and many do not feel that they have adequate preparation and resources to help them succeed. Key findings from a recent Pew Research Center survey of veterans highlighted difficulties experienced by many veterans during the transition to civilian life—only about half of veterans say the military prepared them well for their transition to civilian life; post-9/11 veterans were more than twice as likely than pre-9/11 veterans to say that readjusting to civilian life was difficult; and about one third of veterans say they had trouble paying the bills after leaving the military, yet only 12% indicated that they received food assistance from the government. Furthermore, about 40% of veterans say that the government has not given them enough help.¹¹

As part of its efforts to meet the needs of veterans who are recently transitioning, underemployed, or vulnerable, the VA must proactively address the issue of veteran food insecurity. The VA should integrate information about federal nutrition assistance programs like SNAP as part of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) materials and trainings; include information about federal assistance programs like SNAP as part of the VA's new "Solid Start" suicide prevention program; and work with community partners and USDA to create and actively distribute veteran-specific resources about food insecurity and SNAP. All relevant VA staff must be trained on issues of food insecurity, so that they know and understand SNAP and its rules.

4. Listen to Veterans

The stigma associated with receiving SNAP poses an intangible yet formidable barrier that is especially pronounced for the veteran population. Negative public perceptions of SNAP have been heightened in recent years as a result of rhetoric associated with regulatory changes proposed by the Trump administration designed to restrict access to SNAP. This creates a chilling effect and adds to the stigma that makes veterans and other individuals in need reluctant to seek help and apply for SNAP.

¹¹ Parker, K; Igielnik, R; Barroso, A; Cilluffo, A. "The American Veteran Experience and the Post-9/11 Generation." *Pew Research Center*. September 10, 2019. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

This Subcommittee, or the full House Veterans' Affairs Committee, should hold a follow-up hearing on the issue of veteran food insecurity to include the perspective of individual veterans who have real lived experience with this issue, researchers who have examined food insecurity within the veteran and general populations, and additional veteran service organizations to explore models for community partnerships around outreach and SNAP enrollment.

We also urge USDA and the VA to collaborate with veteran service organizations and anti-hunger organizations to develop a strategic outreach plan for veterans who do not receive care or services through the VA, including peer-to-peer outreach. Such efforts ideally could take place within the context of a federal interagency task force focused on veteran food insecurity, modeled on the successful example of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness that has made great strides toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness in the U.S. Exploration of such an interagency approach to addressing veteran food insecurity would be a worthy next step for this Subcommittee, in collaboration with the House Committee on Agriculture's Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations.

5. Explore Related Issues

Lastly, I implore Congress—especially members of this Subcommittee who also serve on the House Armed Services Committee (Reps. Bergman, Brindisi, Banks, and Luria)—to address the separate but related issue of food insecurity among currently serving military families. This is another long-neglected issue of national security, military readiness, retention, and recruitment, and we at MAZON have proposed easy, common-sense policies for Congress to enact as soon as possible.

In closing, I would like to again thank Chairman Levin and Ranking Member Bilirakus for inviting me to share MAZON's perspective on this critically important issue. The failure to address veteran food insecurity undercuts our next generation of Americans who want to serve in the Armed Forces and presents a challenge to our national security. Children from families where a parent served in the military are much more likely to enlist for military service than counterparts from civilian households. But low-income, working age veterans raising children have much higher odds of experiencing very low food security compared to non-veterans.¹² As we are reminded by Mission: Readiness, an organization of over 750 retired admirals, generals, and other top military leaders, obesity—which is directly related to food insecurity and poor nutrition—limits the pool of eligible recruits for military service and negatively affects our national security.¹³ Failing to address the crisis of food insecurity and obesity for our nation's children—especially the children in military and veteran households who are more likely to serve in the military—threatens our national security.

¹² Kamdar, N; Lester, H; Daundasekara, S; Greer, A; Utech, A; Hernandez, DC. "Food Insecurity Among U.S. Veterans with Children: Findings from NHANES 2011-2014." Poster presentation at American Public Health Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, PA. November 2019.

¹³ Maxey, H; Bishop-Josef, S; Goodman, B. "Unhealthy and Unprepared." *Council for a Strong America*. October 2018. <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/737-unhealthy-and-unprepared>.

While food pantries across the country provide critical food assistance to veterans and others in need, they were only conceived as a temporary and emergency response to the widespread problem. Veteran food insecurity will not be solved by food pantries that are already struggling to keep up with current demands and cannot make up for the gaps in our safety net programs, which continue to be at risk of harmful changes and cuts.

Allowing veterans who have made great personal sacrifices in service to our nation to struggle with hunger is shameful, insulting, unnecessary, and costly. Indeed, it is unconscionable. If our federal agencies and Congress do not take more proactive steps to identify veterans who may experience food insecurity and to connect them with available benefits and resources, we do these veterans and our nation as a whole a grave disservice.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

**U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Nutrition**

Testimony of
Abby J. Leibman
President and CEO
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
Washington, DC

January 12, 2016

Distinguished members of the Subcommittee on Nutrition and Committee on Agriculture, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

I am Abby Leibman, President and CEO at MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a national nonprofit organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the US and Israel. Founded in 1985, MAZON partners with literally hundreds of food banks, pantries, and direct service agencies that provide for people who are hungry and advocate for other ways to end hunger and its causes. MAZON's Board of Directors has made hunger among military families a core priority for our education and advocacy efforts. MAZON has a strong interest in the development of sensible and compassionate food and nutrition policies for military and veterans families. It is on this topic that I would like to speak with you today.

MAZON believes that those who make great personal sacrifices in service to our country should not have to struggle to provide regular, nutritious meals to their families.

We first became concerned about this issue more than 4 years ago when our colleagues from the emergency food network shared concerns about the uptick in the number of military families and veterans turning to them for food assistance.

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Across the country, service members were (and still are) showing up at food pantries, sometimes in uniform, looking for help in feeding their families. While many emergency food providers have responded by developing specific and innovative programs to assist food-insecure military families, most of these organizations are strapped by increasing demands for services in general and have limited capacity to address this population.

MAZON was alarmed by these reports about struggling military families and veterans and determined to investigate the issue. We conducted an exhaustive search for accurate data from the Department of Defense, USDA, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Congress, and direct service providers. We found that hunger is experienced too often among veterans, especially those veterans having difficulty transitioning back to civilian life and the workforce, waiting extended periods of time for disability determinations, or struggling to make ends meet when their disability pay is low.

For currently serving members of the military, food insecurity is triggered by a number of different circumstances, including low pay among lower ranking enlistees, high unemployment among military spouses, larger household sizes, challenges around activation and deployment, and unexpected financial emergencies. There is clear evidence of widespread reliance on food pantries and distribution programs on and near military bases; in fact, MAZON learned from a source at the Pentagon that there are food pantries operating on or near *every single* naval and marine base in the United States! There can be no denying that food insecurity among military families is a real and painful reality and that government safety net programs are not adequately meeting the needs of those who serve our country.

There are three important actions that we urge Congress to take now to begin to address this growing problem:

Demand more data – Despite strong anecdotal evidence, food insecurity among military families is not adequately documented or monitored by government agencies, and indeed the problem has long been obscured and ignored. Data are often withheld from the public or are excessively difficult to obtain. What data we have been able to secure are often contradictory, out of date or simply incomprehensible.

For example, USDA's most recent data indicates that approximately 2,000 active duty service members participate in the SNAP program. However, we believe the scope of the need is significantly larger than that number reflects. This figure only counts families that self-report as active duty military and is derived using a methodology that

experts have deemed skewed to underreport the number of military families for multiple reasons. Indeed, according to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 19,455 active duty service members were estimated to receive SNAP in 2014. Similar data for WIC is not even available. So no one really knows the military and veteran participation numbers for these programs, let alone estimates for the true level of need in these populations.

Blue Star Family's Military Family Lifestyle Survey offers a glimpse of the economic hardship and food insecurity challenges for active duty families, as well as some of the barriers that make it more difficult for them to get needed assistance. The 2015 survey reported more than 7% of responding active duty military and spouses faced food insecurity within the past year. Nearly 6% of respondents sought emergency food assistance through a food bank, pantry, or charitable organization, while only 2.4% participated in SNAP.

A more complete understanding of the scope and characteristics of the growing problem of food insecurity among military families and veterans will enable DOD, USDA, the VA and Congress to better identify gaps in federal food program usage and provide a meaningful response to the unique challenges confronting these vulnerable households.

MAZON has sought out additional data to help in this effort by working with colleagues in the House Armed Services Committee to request a General Accountability Office report to explore these issues. Having the House Agriculture Committee weigh in on the need for better government data and accountability, including guidance for the GAO report, will give greater urgency to the call for an effective response to this issue.

However, I must underscore here that in our view, if even one military family goes without adequate and nutritious food, this nation is not meeting its responsibility to those who serve our country! Upon Senate passage of the FY16 NDAA bill, the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee stated, "It is critical for our troops to know that we can put politics aside to support them, their families, and their mission to protect our country." Sadly, when the problem of food insecurity among military families continues to go unscrutinized and unaddressed, such self-congratulatory rhetoric rings hollow.

But data alone is clearly not the answer.

Remove policy barriers now -- Federal policies are denying currently serving military families who are struggling the resources they need to help keep them from experiencing food insecurity.

Many lower ranking service members – especially those with multiple dependents who live off base or in privatized housing – are systematically made ineligible for SNAP because their housing allowance is counted as income. For these families, the best option available to them is to frequent food pantries on and off military bases.

The Basic Allowance for Housing is excluded as income for the purposes of calculating income taxes and eligibility for some federal programs, including WIC and Head Start. By the same token, we believe that the BAH should be consistently excluded as income for the purposes of determining eligibility for *all* nutrition assistance programs. The intent of the BAH is to provide housing for uniformed service members with minimal military overhead costs by relying on the civilian housing market. Yet treating the BAH benefit as income for determining eligibility for SNAP puts some military families at an unfair disadvantage and disqualifies them from receiving vital food assistance.

MAZON strongly urges an immediate fix to this problem in a way that does not come at the expense of access for others or any funding for nutrition assistance programs. This is a simple and common sense policy change that should be immediately undertaken because it is the right thing to do and would rectify a past slight to military families. Though Members of Congress and Pentagon leaders recently expressed worry that current funding levels leave our armed forces at “the lower ragged edge of readiness,” similar concern has been notably absent for the struggling military families who honorably serve our country despite living on their own personal “ragged edge.”

MAZON has been working for several years with anti-hunger advocates, military service organizations, food banks and pantries, and champions on Capitol Hill to eliminate this unnecessary and harmful policy barrier. Legislation was introduced in 2015 in both the House and Senate that proposed excluding the BAH as income for the determination of nutrition assistance benefits. Sadly, these proposals were swiftly blocked and the problem of food insecurity for currently serving families remains.

Surely we owe it to our military families to remove unfair barriers to access for needed benefits. Making this policy correction supports the national goal of mission readiness for our armed forces and also promotes fiscal responsibility as these families – particularly the children - experience improved health outcomes from higher levels of food security and better nutrition, which in turn yield reductions in long-term health

care costs. The recent report about SNAP by the White House Council of Economic Advisers vividly demonstrates the important role of SNAP in reducing both poverty and food insecurity and documents the significant long-term impacts of SNAP for children in the areas of health, education, and economic self-sufficiency.

Urge agency collaboration – A growing number of veterans – and particularly disabled veterans -- are getting caught in the middle of bureaucratic delays and federal agency silos, unaware of or unable to access nutrition assistance benefits despite their obvious need.

Unacceptable portions of the veteran community, who used to get “three squares a day” as soldiers, now do not know where their next meal will come from. It is estimated that over 300,000 elderly veterans are food insecure and confront the same barriers faced by all seniors trying to access benefits – stigma, misinformation about potential eligibility, and a daunting application process. More recent vets face serious challenges as well. According to a 2012 University of Minnesota study of soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, one in four veterans report being food insecure (27%), and 12% of those vets were classified as having very low food security. These rates are nearly double the prevalence of food insecurity and very low food security for the general US population. In addition, we know that many veterans return from combat with disabilities that make it more difficult to maintain gainful employment and provide food for themselves and their families. Households with a disabled veteran are nearly twice as likely to be food insecure as households that do not have someone with a disability. Ensuring that all veterans have access to adequate and nutritious food is critical, and providing such access to disabled veterans is the least this nation owes to its returning and injured soldiers.

Unfortunately, this is a promise that is not always kept. Veterans who are awaiting a disability determination face enormous challenges in making claims through the VA’s daunting claims process, where delays and multiple appeals are commonplace. During this waiting period, many veterans are unable, or limited in their ability, to access nutrition assistance benefits.

For veterans applying for assistance or seeking medical care through VA facilities, USDA and the VA must do more to help these veterans navigate the application process and connect them to benefits and resources available to help them meet their basic needs. USDA could help the VA serve as a conduit for outreach and education about SNAP and proactively link vets to nutrition assistance through eligibility screenings and application assistance. Better coordination between USDA and the VA

would go a long way in connecting disabled, aging, and struggling veterans with available nutrition assistance, contributing to better long-term health outcomes, lowering health care costs, and reducing unnecessarily high rates of poverty and homelessness in this population.

A simple but highly effective intervention would involve VA social workers and health care professionals adopting as standard practice the utilization of a two-question food insecurity screening tool and then referring those who screen positive to resources that support access to adequate, healthy food, including SNAP. The recent adoption of a similar policy by the American Academy of Pediatrics provides an exciting precedent for an effective intervention that promises smart and cost-effective ways to help ensure that veterans don't come home to hunger.

Perhaps the best way to prevent hunger among veterans is to protect and strengthen the SNAP program. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that SNAP effectively reduces food insecurity and poverty rates, contributes to savings in long-term health care costs, and positively impacts long-term health, education, and economic self-sufficiency outcomes. And yet, recent attempts to cut SNAP – including a proposal during the last Farm Bill process that put 170,000 veterans' benefits at risk – only exacerbate the problem of veteran hunger. And right now, an estimated 60,000 veterans face the loss of SNAP benefits because of the expiration of the time limit waiver for ABAWDs. Cuts to SNAP, in addition to causing harmful impacts on American families struggling to get by and get back on their feet, also hurt military families and veterans who receive critical assistance from the program.

Conclusion

The unfortunate reality of what I have outlined today – of limited data, unfair policy barriers, and bureaucratic silos -- comes at a time when the need among military families and veterans has never been greater.

There has been a sad and ineffective response to military hunger issues in the past. When media stories about military families on SNAP circulated in the late 1990s, Congress was concerned about the *optics* of members of our military receiving food stamps. In order to get these families off of SNAP, Congress in 2000 created a parallel program – the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance (FSSA) – administered by the Department of Defense with an explicitly stated goal of removing military families from the SNAP rolls. This little-known and poorly administered DOD program did not work either to get military families off of SNAP, or more importantly, to adequately

address the challenges of food insecurity that are faced by some military families. It was such a failure, in fact, that Congress recently voted in the 2016 NDAA bill to sunset the failed FSSA program domestically at the end of 2016. However, without any additional action taken, Congress has effectively abandoned the thousands of struggling military families who fall through the cracks of SNAP eligibility and turn instead to the emergency food system out of desperation. These families deserve more than failed policies and government indifference.

Therefore MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger strongly urges Congress to take action now to effectively address the problems of military and veteran food insecurity that I have shared with you and that have been tragically ignored for far too long. The bipartisan-appointed National Commission on Hunger, in its final report released just last week, made recommendations to address military food insecurity consistent with what I have outlined for you today. I hope that my testimony and the personal reflections shared by Erika Tebbens provide the necessary justification for expeditious Congressional action.

The principle of leaving no one behind is deeply embedded in the ethos of the US military. If Congress continues to ignore the problem of hunger among service members and veterans, we are surely leaving them behind and in the enemy hands of hunger and poverty.

MAZON welcomes the opportunity to work with you to create lasting and meaningful change to meet the needs of our military and veteran families. Thank you.